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Recognizing and Responding to Child Maltreatment

Educators play a vital role in identifying, reporting, and preventing child maltreatment. Because you spend a great deal of time with children on a daily basis, you are in a good position to observe changes in a child's appearance or development. You not only have a vested interest in protecting children given your role as an educator, you also have a legal mandate to report suspected child maltreatment. While no one wants to believe that they know a child who is being abused, statistics show maltreatment is occurring to children in every community, school, and neighborhood.

What is Child Maltreatment?

- *Physical Abuse* – serious physical injury inflicted by, or substantial risk of serious injury allowed by a parent or caregiver.
- *Sexual Abuse* – behavior of a sexual nature imposed on a child including fondling, masturbation, oral sex, vaginal or anal penetration, exhibitionism, child pornography, and suggestive behavior/comments.
- *Emotional Abuse* – expression of attitudes or behaviors towards a child that may create serious emotional or psychological damage.
- *Neglect* – serious disregard for a child's supervision, care, or discipline.

Signs of Possible Physical Maltreatment

- Unexplained bruises in various states of healing.
- Self-destructive behaviors such as hitting or biting oneself.
- Welts, bite marks, bald spots.
- Unexplained fractures, abrasions, burns, or wounds.
- Expression of unusual fear of parent/caregiver.

Signs of Possible Sexual Maltreatment

- Engagement in or knowledge of sexual behaviors beyond a child's expected development.

- Regression to behaviors such as thumb-sucking or limited speech.
- Pain, itching, bruising, or bleeding in the genital area.
- Delinquent or aggressive behavior, depression, or suicide attempts.
- Substance abuse, self-mutilation, promiscuity, running away

Signs of Possible Emotional Maltreatment

- Speech disorders, developmental delays.
- Ulcers, asthma, severe allergies.
- Habit disorders including thumb sucking or rocking.
- Extreme passive or aggressive behavior.
- Very low self-esteem, antisocial, or destructive actions.

Signs of Possible Neglect

- Reported abandonment by parent/caregiver.
- Unattended medical needs, lack of supervision.
- Consistent hunger, inappropriate dress, poor hygiene.
- Lice, distended stomach, poor social skills, begging or stealing food.
- Frequent absences or tardiness at school; extreme fatigue or falling asleep in class.

When a Child Discloses Maltreatment

Listen carefully to the child. It is not your responsibility to determine if maltreatment has occurred. You only need to suspect possible maltreatment in order to make a report. Let the child talk and avoid asking questions. Tell them you believe them and explain that you will need to tell other adults who can help. Do not promise to keep the maltreatment a secret and do not share the information with people who are not directly involved in the situation. Remember, you do not need anyone's permission to make a report, regardless of any policy by your employer. Also, you can file a report anonymously.

After Your Report is Made

If your report is accepted for assessment, DSS should initiate that assessment within 24 hours for abuse and within 72 hours for neglect. The assessment will include a visit to the home and the school and interviews with the child, their family, and school personnel.

The job of DSS is to protect the child while assisting the family to address the issues that are contributing to the abusive or neglectful behavior. Families most frequently work with DSS to receive services in the form of counseling, emergency foster care services, help with basic needs, parenting classes, and intensive in-home services. If you disagree with DSS's decision, you can request a review of the case by the District Attorney.

